The Word Made Flesh - John 1:1-18
Dec. 13, 1964

There is nothing more difficult than retelling an old story in a way that illicits interest on the part of the listener. Yet it is not impossible. A new twist, a new angle, any number of techniques can be employed to make theold become new. The real danger, however, is that the point or thrust of the story can become dulled through constant repetition. Children have their favorite stories stories they would have us read to them nightly. But it is not long until the relationship between reader and listener changes, ~~f~~ From one of wide eyed recipient and all wise revealer of great mysteries, to one of careful critic and bored droner. it changes after several readings
Point has lost its attraction
the child focuses his attention on the matter of exact repetition of the words he has heard so many times.

This is the first obstacle to retelling the Christmas story. We have heard it so very many times that the impact has largely been dissapated The thrust; that which we call "Goodness" or "good tidings of great joy" is lost and we find ourselves with a fixation on one or two of the stories secondary details. news

The second ostacle to getting at the heart of the matter is the fact that there are other stories being told at this particular time. The general tempo of life is greatly increased during December. Harried, busy people find it difficult to keep in touch with their families--let alone listen to a story they've heard before. Simultaneously with the story, a thousand voices are shouting in the market place. Everyone is celebrating and I'm still not convinced that most know what they're celebrating.

Finally, the details of the story iiself ~~is~~ are so warmly appealing that they too become a diversion. There is no more heart-warming scene than the nativity with sweet smelling hay and cattle lowing. For a brief moment the whole world smiles benevolently at a new born baby. and then goes on about its ~~way~~ business as if he didn't ever really exist.

These are a few of the problems we ecnounter as we look again to Bethlehem. We are caught--and yet it is incumbent upon us to dig below the surface of the whole Christmas ethos--and to hear again the enormous word the birth of the baby speaks. And so, I have chosen as my text, on this third Sunday of Advent, the introduction to the Gospel of John. The nativity is not mentioned; there are no shepherds nor wisemen; but in a very real sense it is the most important Christmas story of all. I chose this text because, in the final anlysis, we are not celebrating the birth of a baby alone; we are celebrating the specific identity of that child; who he was, what he became, and what he did. As Christians, we are primarily concerned with what is ("good") about this birth over and above all other births. And so we find ourselves asking the question of theincarnation. What does it mean; that Jesus was born in Bethlehem? Over and above the tenderness of the manger what does it mean?

It is interesting to note that the autor of the 4th Gospel chose to preface his acount of the good news by introducing his readers to two ideas--~~The Word and God.~~ God + the Word The book begins" ("in the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.") The Greek, here rendered "word" actually denotes far more than a spoken noise or a written combination of letters. The Greek is Logos, and it means the active, self-expression of God. J. B. Phillips, in his translation of the N.T. reads: ("At the beginning God expressed himself. That pesonal expression, that word, was with God and was God.") I've always felt that this is a little closer to the original intent. In the beginning, in the cosmic act of creation, God Almighty expressed himself. It was no mere spoken word; it was an act; an act that was a part of God himself.

We ought to be able to comprehend this. Certainly God has given us the means of expressing ourselves, in lmany ways other than words.

Great literature is the self expression of great men. But likewise, great art is a form of self expression. On canvas the artist pours forth his feeling, his view of the world; he communicates by expressing himself. The deep melancholy of his sixth Symphony tells us a lot about Peter Tschiakowsky. The vibrant joy of the Water Music, or the Messiah gives us George F. Handel's view of life. These are some of the ways men express themselves; in the Biblical sense they are words. When Winston Churchill wanted to rally the beleaguered population of London he didn't just talk to them; he went out among them--and in so doing he spoke more eloquently than he ever could over the radio. When Pres. elct Eisenhower wanted to show the nation and the world that we were deeply committed to the people of S. Korea, he didn't use the rostrum of the Un or coast to coast tv, he got on a plane and flew to Kroea. Again his action was eloquent. In the Biblical sense he "spoke."

I wasn't very old when someone told me the time honored proverb: ("Actions speak louder than words.") In other words, communication takes place when we act. We express ourselves far more effectively by the way we act, than the words we speak.

This is what the author of the 4th Gospel is saying about God. He is an expressive God! he communicates through the things he does beginning with creation. This self expression, this word, is not separate from God, but is inextricably aprt of himself. The author is laying the theological foundation. God is one who is known through his acts; for it is his nature to be an acting, communicating God.

Now, having established this much about the nature of God, the author goes on to make an awesome claim. ("And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.") For a moment put yourself in the place of the second century Greeks who first read this passage. As a sophisticated Greek you would have no trouble up to this point. Having

read the great Greek philosophers you wuld believe in one God, an abstract God--but nevertheless a single God. You would know about the people to the East who also believed in one God, and since the book was about one of them you would be mildly interested. You might be a little surprised by the opening assertion that God speaks and acts and expresses himself. An intelligent man could see that this might be true. But then your eyes encounter the fantastic claim, the enormous claim, that the word became flesh; that God expressed himself through the life of a man; that in Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish carpenter executed some 70 years ago as a criminal, that in this way, the one God has spoken. Here the intelligent Greek would react in one of two ways. He would either dismiss the claim as absolute fantasy--or he would pursue the matter further--learning more about this one who was the word made flesh. The Greek would see the enormity of the claim; he would sense the sharp, cutting edge--he would quickly see that it was either the most patently absurd claim ever made--or the most important. He would see that the intelligent man must either violently reject it--or passionatley embrace it. There would be no middle ground.

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ at Christmas time, we are reiterating the claim made in the first chapt. of John. But I'm not at all certain that we ever see the enormity of that claim. Granted ~~that~~ an entire civilization marks the birth date with a great flurry; everyone feels good in side about baby Jesus. But, how many are going beyond Bethlehem to the staggering assertion that in this Baby, God expressed himself? Time as dulled ~~the~~ this claim; repetition has obscured it;

the Christmas celebration itself has caused it to fade into the background. This is my concern this morning; that we, as confessing Christians know just what it is we are shouting and singing about.

The incarnation, the word becoming flesh, is no easy concept to comprehend. Once we have stated it, and placed it at the center of our Christmas celebration, we are faced with the problem of understanding it.

God has given us minds; he has given us the gift of reason. Over and above his other creatures we have the ability to use logic; we can see that two and two always add up to four and we can understand why. We know that red is red and green is green. We know that God is God and man is man--and no one can be both. And yet this is what the fourth Gospel is saying about Jesus--and this is what we are saying as we celebrate his birth. The Word was God--and the word was made flesh; God was incarnate in the flesh and blood of humanity, in the partifular life of Jesus of Nazareth. If we do not realize the illogical claim we are making, the opponents of Christianity certainly do. Friederich Neitzhe poked fun at the idea of "God on a Cross." Jesus himself was nearly stoned by an enraged mob because he said "I am in the father and the fatherin me."

The incarnation is not logical. But men have never been able to accept that. They have taken the doctrine, measured it by their own reason, assuming of course, that God must abide by human logic, and have found it lacking. And so the incarnation has been compromised, bent a little here and there so that we can understand it. I think we fall into this category many times. We don't like to feel that there is somethi we cannot comprehend; we are suspicious of anything that doesn't fall neatly into place in our thinking. We lack a healthy sense of the mysterious And the result ~~of our labor~~ is always a watered down version of Christianity. The birth of Jesus, instead of exploding into our conscious

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~~nes~~ with all the power and mystery of God, affects us rather like a sedative tablet. The news that Christ is born, instead of sahking us out of self centered lethargy, makes us feel sentimental. Instead of experiencing awe at the "word made flesh" we stand before the nativity and say "isn't that cute." insert here

The whole message of Christianity; the entire history of the Christian church--begins with the brith of a chi d; with the word made flesh. ~~It is the incarnation that distinguishes Christianity from all the other religions of the world.~~

Let us, this Christmas, see that we cannot explain what happened; we cannot understand it; our reason--our logic takes us so far and it will go no further. The miracle of Christmas lies beyond human reason; for it is an act of God. Rather than smiling down at the tender stable scene--God was there; God was acting. God was revealing himself in a way he had never done before. And so, understanding what we ~~mean~~ are saying, seeing the enormous claim we are making, let us approach the event itself with a true assessment of our inabilities. Let us, in the words of Paul "Behold a mystery" and like the wisemen, fall on our knees in humility. Amen

When God confronted Moses in the burning bush, you will remember that Moses removed his shoes, for he was standing on Holy Ground. The presence of God filled him with fear and trembling. The stable in Bethlehem should first move us in the same direction. Serene and tender - and yet the very invasion of God into human history. The whole world was changed that night: human history was radically altered: because of the impact of that event this is the year 1965 - and not 6,000 and something.